

Kalif Raymond turning heads as receiver, return specialist with Broncos

By Jennifer Toland

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During the first week and a half of Denver Broncos training camp, rookie Kalif Raymond has been the first player on the practice field and one of the last to leave it, and that would come as no surprise to his former Holy Cross coaches and teammates. In his four years at Holy Cross, Raymond was known not only as a speedy receiver and exciting return specialist, but also for his diligence, attention to detail and study habits.

“I want to come in here and make the impression of how hard I’m willing to work to earn a spot on the team,” Raymond said in a telephone interview following a recent practice at the Broncos’ training facility in Englewood, Colorado. “I want to be the first guy out here, warmed up so I’m ready to attack everything 100 percent. Being the last to leave, there is always something you can work on. Anything I can do to improve my game, I’m going to do.”

The 5-foot-9, 160-pound Raymond turned heads at a pro day at Harvard in March, when he clocked a 4.34-second 40 and translated that speed into his route running for the scouts to see. Raymond went undrafted, but the reigning Super Bowl champion Broncos signed him at the conclusion of this year’s NFL Draft.

Raymond, who graduated from Holy Cross in May, made an impression in Denver’s spring rookie minicamp, and has continued to garner attention in training camp, returning punts and kickoffs and catching passes from quarterbacks Mark Sanchez, Paxton Lynch and Trevor Siemian.

“Kalif is very explosive,” coach Gary Kubiak told the Denver media last week. “He’s not very big, but he is very explosive. I think he understands his role and how he can make this team as a returner or slot-type player for us. He’s taken advantage of it.”

Last weekend, Raymond caught two long touchdown passes from Lynch, including a 39-yarder to end Saturday’s practice. On Thursday, he made a nice grab off a bootleg throw from Sanchez. Raymond has worked with all three QBs.

“It’s definitely been hard work,” Raymond said. “I’m coming out here and going as hard as I can. It’s a pretty cool experience. You’ve got fans out here that are watching you and everything is more uptempo and the vets are bringing intensity. They’re giving me an opportunity and I want to take advantage of it.”

In addition to Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, the Broncos currently have nine other wide receivers on the roster. Raymond is one of four rookies among the group.

Raymond has returned both punts and kickoffs — “I’m trying to make an impact any way I can,” he said — and he could certainly make a mark on special teams like he did at Holy Cross.

In addition to establishing career highs with 74 receptions, 978 yards and nine touchdowns his senior season, Raymond ranked second in the Patriot League with 1,543 all-purpose yards and became the first HC player since Steve Silva in 2005 to return a kickoff and a punt for a TD in the same season.

During the weeks between minicamp and training camp, Raymond returned home to the Atlanta area for a week, then came to Worcester to work out with his old HC teammates and with a trainer in Boston. Joining the Broncos, who defeated the Carolina Panthers to capture Super Bowl 50 in February, was initially awe-inspiring for Raymond.

“This was my first NFL training camp, this was my first time and there was definitely an awe factor,” he said. “I’m playing with guys I saw on TV. It’s very, very cool, but at the same time, you’re out here competing, you’re out here working hard. The awe factor hits you for a second, but after a while you’re like, ‘OK, now it’s time to go. I’m out here working, competing for a job.’ ”

Holy Cross coach Tom Gilmore marveled at how Raymond improved his football IQ the last couple seasons, learning the nuances of running routes and breaking down defenses. He is studying his Broncos playbook hard.

“The plays are a challenge in this league,” Raymond said. “You study, but being able to hear (the play) in the huddle and react as soon as you hear it and know what you have and know what you’re doing, that’s probably the hardest part. The reps that you get are very important. You’ve got to get mental reps on the days the vets are getting the most reps, then come out here and hear a play and study enough so your first time hearing it you know exactly what you have.

“I think I’m adjusting pretty well,” Raymond said. “We study a lot at night and on our down time, so when we hear (the play), it’s reaction. I’m not thinking as much. I can just go out there and play.” The Broncos play their first preseason game Thursday at the Bears, which will be another big opportunity for Raymond.

“I’m going to keep doing what I’m doing,” he said, “keep working hard, keep studying my plays and use coaches’ feedback so I can adjust even when I make a mistake. It’s a great experience. You follow all these guys and now you’re in the locker room with them. It’s a pretty cool thing.”

Little-known Kalif Raymond playing big for Broncos in stacked WR competition

By Nick Groke
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In a stacked competition among wide receivers, little-known rookie Kalif Raymond of Holy Cross raced right into sight.

Coach Gary Kubiak loudly praised Raymond during 11-on-11 drills Sunday. And during one-and-one work between wide receivers and defensive backs, Raymond jukeb cornerbck Lorenzo Doss to separate himself by more than 10 yards for a wide-open catch.

“Kalif is very explosive,” Kubiak said.

The Broncos are looking at Raymond, who’s generously listed as 5-foot-9, as a punt returner and slot receiver, Kubiak said.

“This is my dream,” Raymond, who wasn’t drafted, said of being with the Broncos. “Anything I can do to get on the field, whether it be receiver, returner, sniper, gunner, anything they need. I’ll snap the ball if they need me to.”

With veterans Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders set as clear leaders at wide receiver, the rest of the group is battling for jobs. They include Bennie Fowler, Jordan Taylor, Marlon Brown, Cody Latimer and Mose Frazier.

Catching attention. Durrone Neal, another undrafted rookie wide receiver, beat safety Brandian Ross on a deep route up the middle for an impressive catch on a ball thrown by Paxton Lynch.

“I’ve said from Day One that wide receiver really has the chance to be the strength of our team,” Kubiak said of the group. “It’s going to be really hard to make the team at that position.”

Different tone. Offensive tackle Russell Okung, who signed a five-year, \$53 million contract (with one year guaranteed) during the offseason, came to Denver from a different situation in Seattle. Training camp with the Seahawks, led by coach Pete Carroll, is more casual.

“I would say Kubiak handles things more professionally, whatever that means,” Okung said. “Pete is a lot more laid back. There’s a lot more freedom there, but I would say Kubiak is more structured and more traditional in that way. Pete’s definitely a professional, but it’s different in the sense of the discipline of what’s required of us here all of the time.”

QUARTERBACK WATCH:

A summary of how Broncos quarterbacks Mark Sanchez, Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch fared at practice Sunday:

Sanchez — The veteran's timing was spot on when wide receivers worked one-on-one against cornerbacks. Sanchez routinely met them with passes that left his hand before their breaks. But in 11-on-11 work, Sanchez faded fast and lost the connection.

Siemian — Either overthrown on deep routes or underthrown on hooks, Siemian seemed lost.

Lynch — The rookie from Memphis couldn't time receiver routes if he had a stopwatch. But in 11-on-11 work, he aired out two deep receptions that had him pumping his fist.